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The Death of Jim Valvano

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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Normally the Catholic Church requires a certain passage of time, as well as evidence of the performance of three miracles, before anyone is presented for canonization to sainthood. Apparently ESPN's standards are not quite that high, as the network canonized Jim Valvano last week following his death. Although Valvano had at least one miracle to his credit, the winning of the 1983 NCAA basketball championship with the miracle shot against Houston as time ran out, it still seems unlikely that he is the stuff out of which saints are made.

I certainly don't want to dance on his grave, but the portrait of Jimmy V that emerged from the media last week was one that I did not entirely recognize.

It might be good to pause and reflect on Valvano and his career because it seems to me to offer a glimpse at both the best and worst of intercollegiate athletics.

First, let me say that I find it very difficult to not like Jim Valvano, who had a personality that could do more than lead adolescents to put a ball in a hoop. He was a charismatic figure; a streetwise Italian with disarming charm; a high energy New Yorker with a tremendous sense of humor. These characteristics served him well as he built basketball programs at Iona and North Carolina State. It also served him well in dealing with people, and in his post-coaching career on ESPN and ABC television.

It was this personality that made Valvano so popular and beloved in North Carolina, a state that normally does not revere Catholics, Italians, or New Yorkers. When he went to this very prestigious coaching position in 1980 there was much concern over his ability to function in the new culture. Would Jimmy V have culture shock, or more importantly would the people of the Tar Heel State be able to accept this alien creature. These concerns were put aside shortly after his arrival in Raleigh and a few appearances on the radio talk shows. His charm and wit won over an entire state in less time than it takes to say NCAA violations.

The joy of victory and competition, the love of the game, the ability to rise to the occasion, all were part of what made

Valvano a great coach. He approached the game with great intensity, and gave all of his energies to it.

But these traits taken to an extreme could and did produce problems for both Valvano and for North Carolina State University. As he rose to the top it was obvious that he loved the adulation and the attention. He could play the media like a master artist but he was seduced by the glamour and eventually succumbed to the pressures.

Jimmy V rose to the top of his profession, and at that level the pressures to sustain winning were enormous. Like many before and since he recruited players who did not belong in college, and then left them to sink or swim on their own. He overlooked the problems: the failure to attend class, the petty theft, the drug use. If a player was good enough, these shortcomings were never addressed.

Jimmy V corrupted the institution he served. He neglected the academic side of the student athlete. Players were given free reign to major in eligibility. He exploited these players, using them and then sending them off, a few to the pros but others back to oblivion. Jimmy V got rich and famous with the million dollar shoe contracts, the endorsements, the radio and TV shows, and the many other perks that came from winning. Some of his players were not as lucky, some left college with nothing.

His tenure ended at North Carolina State, after nearly ten years, amidst charges of corruption that culminated in Valvano's firing, the firing of N.C. State Chancellor Bruce Poulton who tolerated the corruption, and the NCAA slapping North Carolina State with probation.

In less than a year after his firing he was hired by ABC and ESPN to become a television analyst. The impropriety of this move seemed lost on ABC executives who knew talent when they saw it, and felt no need to concern themselves with ethical questions. And they had seen talent. Valvano was superb on television. Those same qualities of sharp wit, Italian charm, New York streetwise lip, which made him a popular figure in North Carolina, now made Valvano a popular figure on television. It also led to the winning of an ACE award as the best commentator\analyst on cable TV.

Then last summer he was diagnosed with cancer. The treatments left him weakened physically, and the cancer racked him with pain. But always Jimmy V fought on, continuing his television

work and his magnificent humor for the TV audience. He set up the "Jimmy V Foundation for Cancer Research," and in March received the Arthur Ashe Award for Courage from ESPN. His appearance there was memorable and inspirational. A few weeks later Sports Illustrated, which had once contributed to the exposure of Valvano's corruption and regularly denounces the exploitation of the student-athlete, ran a glowing cover piece on Valvano.

In the midst of this it is difficult to remember that he was not a saint. Jim Valvano was a good basketball coach, a charming and courageous person, and a person willing to corrupt intercollegiate athletics for his own gain. It would be well to remember all of these things.

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